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Two Indictments of Communism

Daniel Guérin

1957

Two books that appeared simultaneously, those of Tito's prisoner Milovan Djilas and Michel Collinet,¹ have led us to rethink the ideological foundations of Bolshevism. Even though produced by two men of different temperaments and origins and using quite divergent methods, they reach more or less the same conclusions and present more or less the same qualities, as well as the same defects.

¹ Milovan Djilas, *The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System* (Thames & Hudson, 1957); Michel Collinet, *Du Bolchevisme: evolution et variations du Mandmeteninisme* (Le Livre Contemporain, 1957). [Djilas, a former Yugoslav Partisan and Communist leader and at one point touted to succeed Tito as president, became increasingly critical of the Yugoslavian system and was imprisoned in 1956. *The New Class* had been finished before his arrest and was published in the USA in 1957, which led to his being sentenced to a further seven years' imprisonment. Eventually released in 1966, he remained a dissident in Belgrade until his death in 1995. Collinet (1904–1977) was also a former Communist turned dissident, and then became a member of the Socialist Party's Revolutionary Left faction and, later, the Workers' and Peasants' Socialist Party alongside Guérin. He was active in the Resistance during the Second World War, and remained a member of the Socialist Party after the Liberation. —DB]

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Chapter from *For a Libertarian Communism*
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One of their merits is to demonstrate that the Blanquist concept of the party formulated by Lenin from 1901 contained at least in germ the totalitarian communism of the Stalinist era. Djilas and Collinet stress that the ideological monopoly of the leadership of the party, in this case Lenin himself, claiming to embody the objective aspirations of society,² was in fact an idealist conception of history that would later result in the total monopolization of the bureaucratic apparatus over that society.³

Where the two writers diverge is on the historical excuse of “necessity.” Djilas, still incompletely freed of the authoritarian concepts he was brought up on, believes that the success of the revolution, which had to defend its very existence and the indispensable industrialization of the USSR, required the establishment of a tyranny. Collinet, on the contrary, condemns Lenin for having made a virtue of necessity, and does not think totalitarian dictatorship necessarily flowed from the tragic circumstances of the Civil War.⁴

While establishing a direct connection between Leninism and Stalinism, the two authors stress, correctly, that under no circumstances can the two regimes be confused and that differences of an important nature distinguish them, and not simple “nuances.” as Collinet once lets slip. Forms that were still revolutionary during Lenin’s time were transformed into reactionary ones under Stalin.

Collinet and Djilas, in the most solid part of their work, provide both brilliant and implacable descriptions of the privi-

² It is regrettable that neither Collinet nor Djilas quote the remarkable pages (pp. 157, 205) that, well before them, Valine, in his *Revolution inconnue*, dedicated to the Bolsheviks’ claim to infallibility.

³ Nevertheless, Collinet and Djilas both exaggerate Lenin’s dogmatic rigidity and underestimate his surprising intellectual flexibility and his ability to revise his positions in light of facts, aptitudes that on every occasion disconcerted his dull lieutenants and in a large measure compensated for the failing for which he is criticized.

⁴ Collinet here joins Valine without stating so (op. cit., pp. 180–2).

the USSR, Collinet—who is more precise than Djilas on this matter although, alas, he does not go as far as he should—says that “they do not appear to be demanding Western parliamentarism; rather their essence is the independence of the people and their economic and cultural organizations in relation to the party and state apparatuses.”

If Collinet and Djilas had more clearly deduced these libertarian conclusions from their analyses they would have avoided getting bogged down, due to their failure to clearly glimpse a third way, in a pro-Western Menshevism that deprives their argument of much of its force and persuasive power. None of this, of course, justifies the prison sentence inflicted on the Yugoslav, which does no honor to Tito’s regime.

The lesson: a revolutionary socialist who frees himself of Marxist-Leninist Jacobinism is in great danger of falling into petitbourgeois and counter-revolutionary ideologies. There is only one healthy and certain way to “de-Jacobinize,” to distance oneself from authoritarian socialism, and that is to go over to libertarian Marxism, the only reliable value of our time, the only socialism that has remained young, the only authentic socialism.

cies “untainted by any vestiges of imperialism.” and Djilas that the United States tend towards an increasingly statist regime. The dangers that American big business and its claim to world leadership present are conjured away. Collinet goes even further when he attacks the Bandung Accords which, according to him, are “nothing but a weapon against the Western democracies.” and when he presents Mossadegh and Nasser as instruments in the service of Russian expansionism.⁶ The impact of the indictment of Stalinist totalitarianism and the executioners of the Hungarian people is considerably weakened by the blank check issued the aggressors of Suez and Western colonialism.

Why do Collinet and Djilas both go off the rails at the end of their analysis? In my opinion the real reason for their error is their inability to find a third way outside of those of Stalinism and bourgeois democracy. And the source of this inability is the refusal to rally to libertarian Marxist ideas.

They make only vague and insufficient allusions to the great conflict between authoritarian socialism and anarchist socialism that so deeply divided the working-class movement of the nineteenth century. They seem to be ignorant of the fact that the totalitarian communism they denounce was condemned a century before them in prophetic terms by Proudhon and Bakunin. For Collinet and even more for Djilas authority directly exercised by the proletariat in the absence of any state coercion is an “illusion” and a “utopia.” And yet the two authors occasionally contradict themselves and express unconscious libertarian aspirations. Collinet lets slip that “the logic of democracy was not the Jacobin state, even animated by good intentions, but the state, withering away and transferring its functions to the entire social body.” And Djilas, after having denounced the Jacobin-style intolerance of contemporary communists, exalts “man’s imperishable aspiration for freedom.” and announces as imminent the moment when industrialization will render communism “superfluous.” Analyzing the demands of the underground opposition currently maturing in

leged “new class.” of the feudal bureaucracy that seized power in the USSR. For Collinet today’s Russian society realizes “the most perfect absorption of society by the state that history has ever seen.” and for Djilas modern history has never recorded a regime oppressing the masses in so brutal, inhumane, and illegal a fashion. The methods it employed constitute “one of the most shameful pages of human history.” And in a flight of inspiration, he opposes the idealism, devotion, and spirit of sacrifice of communism of its early days to the intolerance, corruption, stagnation, and intellectual decadence of contemporary communism. The analysis of the “new class,” of the way it exploits the working class and its poor economic management, is more acute in Djilas than it is in Collinet: Djilas—and this is the main interest of his book—is a witness who lived the evil from within.

The two authors are in agreement in denouncing the thirst for and obsession with power of the communist oligarchs, as well as in stigmatizing the transformation of Marxism into a dogmatism, into an essentially sterile and conservative scholasticism.

Both Collinet and Djilas reproach Trotsky, not without reason and almost in the same terms, for having shown himself incapable, despite the great merit of his indictment of Stalinism, of defining sociologically and fully exposing the meaning of contemporary communism. Why? Because he lacked perspective, according to Djilas; because he persisted until his death in not questioning Leninist ideas of organization according to Collinet. There is probably something of the truth in both of these explanations.

But to my mind both books are marred by a certain number of errors I would like to point out. In the first place, they both show a total lack of understanding of the concept of “permanent revolution.” Collinet makes the mistake of considering Marx’s famous text of March 1850 an unimportant accident in the history of Marxist thought, an ephemeral “Blanquist” cri-

sis from which the author quickly recovered.⁵ He and Djilas draw erroneous conclusions from a correct observation, which is that the “permanent revolution” is more acutely manifested in backward countries where it is easier to directly leap over the capitalist stage from feudalism to socialism. But they are wrong in concluding that revolutionary Marxism is only applicable to underdeveloped countries and that it has no chance in highly industrialized nations. Maintaining, for example, as Djilas does, that in a country like Germany only reformism can carry the day means forgetting that from 1918 to 1933 the German proletariat was on the brink of victory on several occasions and that without the errors caused by its being a satellite of Moscow, it would probably have abolished the most advanced capitalism of Europe. In May '68 did we not see the working-class revolt in France a hair's breadth from overthrowing an advanced capitalism?

What is more, the two books insist insufficiently upon the relatively progressive aspects of communism in power, although both mention some of them. Collinet accepts that the national bourgeoisies have been eliminated, the poor peasants liberated from the yoke of big landowners and usurers, and that industrialization has been carried out; Djilas that the collective ownership of the means of production has allowed for the realization of rapid progress in certain sectors of the economy. But the Yugoslav contradicts himself by claiming against all evidence that no great scientific discoveries have been made under the Soviet regime and that in this domain the USSR probably trails tsarist Russia. And in the final conclusions of these two books the progressive aspect is forgotten and the balance sheet presented is too negative.

In the same way, concerning the possibilities for the evolution of the post-Stalinist regime the two authors demonstrate

⁵ *Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League*, London, March 1850. [DB]

a pessimism that in my eyes is excessive. To be sure, they are right in maintaining that the Khrushchev regime was that of a conservative pragmatism lacking in ideas. They are also right in stressing the relatively narrow limits of de-Stalinization and in being skeptical about the democratization and the decentralization of the regime, be it in Russia itself, Yugoslavia, or Poland. But at times when reading them it seems that “dialectical” evolution is blocked, that it forbids all hope. And yet, in other passages the two authors admit that the break with the Stalinist past is profound, that something has truly changed, that the domination of the “new class” has been shaken, that liberation is on the march, and that the release of popular discontent is irreversible. But they conclude that the outcome will be irremediable ruin and the collapse of “communism” without indicating with what the “monster” will be replaced.

An ambiguity all the more worrisome in that one senses in their analysis a singular indulgence towards Western bourgeois democracy, considered the sole alternative to “communist tyranny.”

It seems that for both Collinet and Djilas the Russian regime alone is responsible for the Cold War and the division of the world into two blocs. The capitalist and imperialist character of the Western democracies is blurred. For Collinet financial capitalism is a “mythical monster.” and even Djilas who has spent time in the U.S., contests the idea that the Western governments are controlled by a handful of monopolists. Collinet claims with a straight face that there exist Western democra-

⁶ The Bandung Conference of 1955 brought together twenty-nine Asian and African countries, mostly former colonies, with the aim of promoting economic and cultural cooperation and opposing colonialism and neo-colonialism. Mohammad Mosaddegh was the democratically elected prime minister of Iran who was removed from power in a coup organised by British and US intelligence agencies in 1953. Gamal Abdel Nasser led the overthrow of the Egyptian monarchy in 1952 and nationalized the Suez Canal in 1956, which led to invasion by Britain, France, and Israel. [DB]